

Rugby arts *embrace* multi-generations

By Andrea Winkjer Collin

Do lively people create a community's diverse arts program, or does a diverse arts program attract lively people to its community?

This is a classic chicken-egg debate that could keep the people of Rugby musing for a long time. However, those who might be so inclined have better things to do than ponder philosophical questions. Their energies have instead been focused for the past 40 years on offering a wide variety of multi-generational arts opportunities to their region.

Rugby has a population just shy of 3,000 people, and many of its cultural activities are coordinated through Village Arts, a non-profit association that was formed in 1967 to nurture artistic activities. While theater productions have been its staple, Village Arts has sponsored visual arts events, community orchestras and choruses, and literary groups. It also runs a school of music. Village Arts is based out of an old downtown building,

which is the home of its costume collection and box office – a fitting use for a building that was Rugby's first opera house. Theater performances are held at the high school auditorium.

Other activities in town not directly sponsored by Village Arts include a pre-school music academy, and a Heart of America Concert Association. The town also has a unique dress museum.

Many talented people

"We are a group of lively people who feel the arts are very important," says Glory Monson, a Rugby native who returned home after teaching school in California about the time Village Arts was founded. Monson has been its artistic director right from the start and marvels at the talent in the community. "I can't explain how so many talented people with college degrees in music and drama have found their way to Rugby."

She has been involved in all the community and children's theater productions that have been presented every year since. While she can't name a favorite – she considers all of them special – the highlight of her professional career was the musical she wrote and produced herself. *Medora* was based on the life of the Marquis de Mores' wife.

Medora took Monson five years to create and was performed by Rugby actors the summer of 2001. "It was a wonderful production," Monson recalls.

Tilman Hovland, now retired after 35 years as the high school band director, is involved with the concert association and directs the community and youth

orchestras.

The Heart of America Concert Association was founded in 1975 to bring performing programs to the community. Working through a booking company in Minneapolis, and also tapping regional performers, the concert series originally sponsored four programs a year and has expanded to six. The \$25 season ticket also covers the cost of attending four concerts in nearby Bottineau, under a reciprocal agreement the two communities share. The 300-plus seats at the high school auditorium are regularly filled, sometimes with a standing-room only crowd of more than 400.

Concerts in the park

The concert association takes a break in the summer. Then weekly concerts are held Wednesday nights at the city park. Sponsored since 1996 by the Rugby Lions Club, the summer series runs from June to mid-August. Kathy Kirchofner coordinates the weekly performances, which cover all genres, including classical, jazz, opera and contemporary. Some performers are faculty from the International Music Camp, or area natives who are visiting home. Crowds that average 250 people come to enjoy the music and the free ice cream cones.

"People come with their blankets and folding chairs and enjoy the music while their kids play on the swings nearby,"

Joline Dunn performs the title part in the 2001 production of *Medora*, along with Cowboy Chorus members, from left, Greg Myhre, Joseph Mack, Hubert Seilor, Josiah Jenkins, Jacob Jenkins and Jeff Childress. Photos by Steve Mueller and Deb Jenkins.





The Rugby arts scene involves many people, including those pictured here. From left are Jocelyn Seiler, Elizabeth Mack, Brooks McClintock and Alex McClintock in the children's 2003 production of *Wonderland*; a group of children rehearsing for a summer production; and performances by the Youth Orchestra and the Civic Orchestra. *Photos from the Pierce County Tribune*

Kirchofner says.

Rugby is considered the smallest town in a multi-state region with a community orchestra. The Rugby Civic Orchestra has 47 members, consisting of business owners, teachers, health care workers, housewives and a smattering of students. For the 2003 Christmas concert, the orchestra joined with the Community Choir to perform five pieces from Handel's *Messiah*. "This was one of our biggest undertakings," says Hovland of the concert. Anyone who has performed the *Messiah* knows it is difficult music. We were proud that we were able to meet this challenge."

The spring concert on May 2 will feature a solo of *The Flight of the Bumblebee*, performed by saxophonist Anthony Mack, a high school senior who has played with the symphony for six years.

Nurturing young talent

Providing performance opportunities for area young people is a common thread running through all of Rugby's programs. The Jenkins family is one that has appreciated this encouragement. "Village Arts is one of the most wonderful programs a community can have," says Deb Jenkins. "We have years of memories of performing together on stage. It shaped us as a family and gave us an identity."

Her late husband, Bob, who died the end of January, was a frequent male lead in the performances. One performance she remembers fondly was *Fiddler on the Roof*, in 1990, when Bob played the part of "Tevye" and she and four of her five children joined him on stage.

"People from seven to 77 work together in these productions," Jenkins says.

"All ages are comfortable interacting with each other."

Young people who participate in every opportunity available to them could have as many as 28 productions on their resumes by the time they graduate from high school. "They have bios that read like professional actors," Jenkins says.

The Jenkins family moved to Rugby in the late 1980s when Bob took a management position at the hospital. He later became a consultant, author and motivational speaker. Both St. Paul natives, Jenkins says they planned to stay in Rugby for a few years and then return to Minnesota. "We came here and found such a wealth of talent and opportunity, we couldn't leave," says Jenkins, who also plays cello in the orchestra.

"Friends from home marvel at how wonderful our life is here. I tell them we have at least two more hours in every work day for activities because we are not tied up in traffic commuting from work to home."

Many cultural opportunities

The wealth of Rugby's arts programs drew David "WhiteThunder" Trottier and his family there in 1992. They were living in Devils Lake and looking for a place to move where he could still play with his band based in Devils Lake. But he needed to be closer to his job in Dunseith, as an owner of Chiptronics, Inc., a wholesale distributor of electronics parts.

"We chose Rugby because of its good schools and its many arts and cultural opportunities," said

Trottier, who with his wife, Helen, are raising four daughters. "What is here far exceeds what would be found in most towns this size."

Trottier has been in a good position to compare communities and their arts programs. He has been a member of the North Dakota Council on the Arts since 1990, and its chairman since 1998. "The state of North Dakota is envied by many states for the number of quality programs we have," he says.

How do North Dakota communities like Rugby do more than what much larger towns in other states are unable to deliver? "We are very lucky to have the people here that we do," Trottier says. "Most of the time when I am asked this I can only say, 'That's just North Dakota.'"

Rugby's Village Arts programs, including its community and children's theater, symphony orchestra, and the summer concert series receive grants from the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support community arts across the state, call 701-328-7590, or visit its website at www.discovernd.com/arts.



The Community Choir performs Handel's *Messiah*. *Photo by Pierce County Tribune*